

Good evening Members of the Appropriations Committee,

It is my honor to appear before you this evening. My name is Joanna Perricone, and I am a second year Automotive Technology student at Gateway Community College. My relationship with Connecticut state colleges began well over a decade ago when I graduated from Central Connecticut State University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre. That degree served as a launching pad into graduate school where I earned a Master of Arts in Arts Administration and went on to a rewarding ten-year career serving several Connecticut non-profit organizations. When I was laid off from my position at a Hartford nonprofit in 2020 due to COVID-19, I decided the timing was right for a career change. As a teenager, I started doing small repairs on my car and loved the feeling of fixing it on my own. As an adult, I love helping other people with their cars and find my workdays at the shop fulfilling. Fast forward and I found myself sitting in a classroom at Gateway's North Haven campus – a student, once again. From my first visit to campus, I felt welcomed – from the security guards to the maintenance staff to the professors. Everybody cares deeply.

Let me tell you something about women in the Automotive field. There aren't many of us. Knowing that can feel intimidating at times, but the faculty and staff at Gateway are supportive and go above and beyond in their roles. Our popular Automotive program provides students with connections to local dealerships and independent repair shops that as non-students, we wouldn't have access to. These connections, for many of us have led to employment in the field before even graduating. The faculty and staff worked hard and advocated for the school to remain open and safe, because you can't learn how to do an oil change through Zoom, and they knew that going virtual would mean sacrificing our learning experiences. My professors in the Automotive program played a part in recognizing my hard work by making me aware of scholarships provided by the Gateway Community College Foundation. After applying, I was awarded the Town Fair Tire Fellowship, which covered my second year of school. Its evident that the professors, faculty and donors' investment in students reaches beyond the classroom.

As I enter into my last semester at Gateway, I am filled with gratitude. This school has made me feel welcome and provided me with the tools to become an excellent Automotive Technician. Attending school can be life-changing for a person. It changed mine. My story is one of many success stories that are a result of Connecticut State Colleges and Universities. For this reason, continued support of them is crucial. This May, I will be graduating with an Associate's degree and continuing to work at an independent shop. It's been a wild ride and I can't wait for the next chapter. Growing up, there wasn't a mechanic in the family. When I'm around cars now, I'm comfortable, confident, happy and able. I'm the family mechanic now. I have Gateway to thank for that.

Thank you legislators, for all your hard work and your support of our colleges.